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Bulletin: The Present State and Development of Professional Sociology

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The following paper, by Asher Tropp (who was then a junior Lecturer at LSE), gives a valuable review of the general state of British sociology at a key stage in its early formal development. Asher Tropp has given permission for its reproduction; as far as possible it is reproduced in its original format.

BULLETIN

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Editorial Note

The British Sociological Association is intending to bring out a Bulletin three times a year. It will be circulated to all members of the Association and will contain a summary of the proceedings at the main meetings and at the study groups. The bulletin will also contain a section of "News and Notes".

In this first issue, the major item is a report of the Association's conference on "The Present State and Development of Professional Sociology" held at the London School of Economics in January 1956.

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THE PRESENT STATE AND DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIOLOGY[1]

The development of British sociology during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries owed comparatively little to the universities. The early "political arithmeticians" and social surveyors, the English Utilitarians, Herbert Spencer, Charles Booth, B. Seebohm Rowntree, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and many other students of society lived and worked outside the tradition of the ancient universities. Academic teaching of sociology did not begin until the first decade of this century and before 1945 was confined to the University of London and some of the university colleges which used the University of London as an examining body. It was not till after the second World War that any significant number of first or higher degrees in sociology was awarded[2]. Until very recently, the majority of university teachers and research workers had received no formal academic training in sociology but were recruited from other disciplines. Those recruited in this way still constitute the majority of holders of senior positions in professional sociology. While "untrained", in the formal sense, these sociologists and their predecessors carried out much significant empirical research and sociological analysis. Indeed it is doubtful if in any other country sociological research has had an equal influence in moulding social policy. Apart from this direct contribution there has been a gradual infiltration of sociological ways of thought and methods of investigation into allied subjects and the growth of a public interest in sociology. With the increase in the number of undergraduates and graduate students in sociology, the stage was eventually reached, from 1948 onwards, when the majority of new university teachers and sociological research workers were being recruited from the products of the university sociology departments. Thus, for the first time, the standard of work in sociology could be assessed in relation to the training provided in the sociology departments.

Investigations by a sub-committee of the British Sociological Association have shown that the large majority of recent graduates in sociology do not become "professional sociologists"; in other words, they are not being employed in positions where their specific training is recognised as being of any more value than a degree in any other of the social sciences or the humanities.1 Yet at the same time there is an unfilled demand, both in the universities and outside, for good sociologists capable of undertaking advanced research. Apart from this problem of the extent to which the universities are preparing future professional sociologists, the growth in the number of separate teaching departments in recent years has focussed attention on the general question of the correct choice and presentation of those sections of sociology that are most suitable for undergraduate study.

Finally, as is natural in a new and growing profession, there exists a feeling among its practitioners that

sociology, both as a body of knowledge and as a research method, is capable of wide application to social questions and that its performance is lagging behind its possibilities.

It was the existence of these problems that led to the calling of a conference of members of the British Sociological Association on “The Present State and Development of Professional Sociology”. The conference was held at the London School of Economics in January 1956 and was confined to university teachers of sociology and full-time research workers. Some sixty members were present at the three sessions. It was intended that the conference should concern itself with the broad relationship between the application of sociological knowledge and the university teaching of sociology as well as with the more specific problems of the recruitment, training and employment of sociologists. In the first session the discussion was led by three members with detailed knowledge of the application of sociology to specific fields. (Dr. M.A. Abrams, Mr. J.H. Madge and Mr. R.G. Stansfield). The discussion at the second session was led by members who were or had been actively involved in the university teaching of sociology (Mr. T.B. Bottomore, Dr. A.H. Halsey, Dr. B. Wootton). It was the aim of the third session to assess the present and future possibilities of the application of sociological knowledge and the employment of university trained sociologists. This final discussion was led by the chairmen of the two previous sessions (Mr. R. Goodman and Professor W.J.H. Sprott[3]), by Mr. Tom Burns and Professor D.V. Glass. Professor T.H. Marshall who had chaired the Conference delivered the concluding address.

In practice, the discussion at the three sessions was not confined to the intended topics but, from the beginning, ranged widely over the whole field of conference problems and beyond. Some of the university teachers, for example, felt so strongly on the question of the relationship between the content of the sociology degree course and the work of certain outside research bodies (e.g. market research and public opinion agencies) that the matter was raised at an early stage in the first session. There was much discussion on the nature of sociology itself. Underlying some of the comments was a deep concern with current trends in sociology and with what some members considered to be a trivialisation of sociology and a retreat from the consideration of significant social problems into the waste-lands of methodological rigour and ethically neutral theory. These basic concerns with the function and purpose of sociology returned at various points in the discussion. It was for these reasons that the Executive Committee of the British Sociological Association requested the present writer (who acted as Conference Secretary) to prepare a personal and subjective assessment of the conference rather than a precis of the papers and discussion.

The three speakers at the first session described their need for research workers and their experience of sociology graduates. They were agreed that there were many problems which sociologists as such could help to solve and that there was room for trained sociologists in the fields of general administration and planning. The specific contribution of the sociologist, as they saw it, lay less in the application of simple research techniques than in the ability to analyse the essential social processes at work in the situation. They were agreed that the type of person who was required for research and planning was one with a wide range of reading, verbal and social skills and a knowledge of research methods based upon study of past classics of social investigation and upon direct experience of empirical research.

Above all, they wished for research workers with a sense of craftsmanship and a knowledge of how to ask and answer significant questions. They suggested that such people should be trained in the universities both by the normal methods of instruction and also at the postgraduate stage by some system of "apprenticeship" to experienced research workers or by attachment to a research team. The prospects for employment of graduates, with the skills they had suggested, were considered to be most promising although there was concern with the lack of continuity of employment at the present day. Dr. Abrams bluntly expressed his disappointment at the general standard of sociology graduates who were coming forward for employment from British universities. He considered that they were inadequately trained for any kind of independent empirical research. Not only did they lack a direct knowledge of research but their knowledge of the literature was also scanty.

The university teachers who led the second session and who spoke in the general discussion were, on the whole, in agreement on the nature and aims of a university education in sociology. The basic core of the sociology course, they suggested, was the comparative study of social institutions. Society should not only be considered factually and empirically; social philosophy was an indispensable part of the training of sociology graduates. Of equal importance, sociology strictly defined, could not be the only constituent of a university degree which should also include social history and social psychology as well as a sociological analysis of economic and political institutions and their relationship with the other social institutions. The sociology degree as they saw it, was broad and humane and not narrowly vocational. Considering the limited time at the disposal of the student, there was a broad consensus that the details of research techniques should be left to the graduate stage.

While there was general agreement with the view of the nature of the degree course expressed above, there was much discussion about certain details. Professor T.H. Marshall emphasised that sociology could not ignore the vocational aspect. Most university departments trained either experts or school-teachers. The university sociology departments, while remaining true to their own traditions of the broad and humane study of society, must necessarily consider the fields in which their graduates would be employed. Other university teachers argued that while sociology stemmed from and was closely allied to social philosophy and political theory, it was distinguished from these basically by its method. Sociology was essentially on empirical study sharing the approach common to all sciences of objective description and experimental investigation of hypotheses. Thus the students' training in sociology would be seriously incomplete if it did not include instruction in the scientific ethos and procedures for the validification of hypotheses - whether these hypotheses stemmed from a value-free sociological theory or from a broad political impulse. Instruction in sociological methods of investigation could not then be left to the postgraduate stage because only a small proportion of graduates continued their education after their degree.

The basic question around which discussion centred was the extent to which the three aspects of sociological education - the social philosophical and ethical, the comparative and analytical and the acquisition of techniques of enquiry - could be combined within the three year course of undergraduate instruction.

While there was no necessary conflict between the needs of extra-mural research and the aims of intra-mural teaching, it appeared impossible to provide undergraduates with sufficient research skills to fit them for immediate employment as research workers without neglecting the other, equally important parts of their education. A few of the better graduates proceeded to the postgraduate departments where training in research techniques could be and was provided. It was unlikely that sociologists with good first degrees and still less with higher degrees would, in any event, be attracted into the lower or intermediate ranks of commercial research. With the expansion of university teaching and research departments in Britain and the Commonwealth, most holders of higher degrees in the past had been absorbed eventually into the universities. The lack of financial support for graduate students meant that the number of British students in the graduate departments had remained small and there appeared, unfortunately, to be little prospect of a substantial increase in the size of graduate departments in the near future.

Other issues were raised during the conference and some of the most important can be mentioned. There was concern at the suspicion of sociology and sociologists still to be found in certain academic quarters. Allied to this it was felt that the university teaching of sociology was expanding far too slowly. The creation of temporary research posts and research departments in universities unattached to teaching departments was also deplored.

There was an evident concern among the university teachers with the low standard of entrants to the university departments. There was a feeling that the claims of sociology, both as a general education and as a possible profession, are not presented clearly enough in the schools to potential students. Very few of the present grammar school teachers have any knowledge of modern sociology and there is a tendency for them to think of it as a "soft option" for those pupils who are not clear what to study at university but who are "interested in people". While recognising that a large proportion of sociology graduates would be employed in social work or social administration, it was felt that too many students in the sociology departments had entered for the sole purpose of obtaining a qualification for employment in social work. Most teachers had suffered from the would-be hospital almoners or personnel managers who found it difficult to interest themselves in either empirical research or sociological theory.

There was concern with the provisions for the financing of research in universities and independent research organisations and the lack of continuity of employment of research workers. There was some criticism of the policy of the foundations which sponsor research, particularly in regard to their unwillingness to finance long-term and fundamental investigations. While some speakers suggested that a central committee to allocate research funds on a long-term basis should be set up, a larger group was apprehensive that such a committee would establish a national monopoly and would discourage certain forms of research. It was suggested that industry or commerce night directly finance research carried out by universities and independent research organisation but it was feared that this might divert such research from its basic purpose of constructive social criticism.

While it is impossible to assess precisely the extent to which the conference was decided upon the main issues put before it by the speakers, a certain broad consensus did appear to emerge by the last session. The university teachers were agreed that the correct syllabus for undergraduates and graduates had to be determined in the light of the universities' duty to provide a general education and to train people to contribute to the advancement of sociology. Undergraduate training should continue to be broad and humane leaving it to the graduate stage to combine a continuation of this broad education with the training of students in advanced sociological theory and research methods. There was some feeling that the British Sociological Association should organise a further conference of sociology teachers to discuss the details of teaching and the recruitment of undergraduate and graduate students.

The main issue which underlay much of the discussion was an ideological one. Sociology stemmed originally from a criticism of existing society - a desire to investigate its problems and to make reasoned suggestions for its betterment. It appeared essential to many of those present at the conference to maintain this definition of the function of sociology. There was a feeling that this would be endangered if the main task of the university departments was seen as the direct training of students for immediate employment in industrial, commercial or even governmental agencies. It is essential that sociologists should play their part at the right levels, in these and other institutions, in research and policy formation. The core of sociology should, however, remain the independent teaching and research in the universities and the research carried out by the independent research organisations.

The most immediate needs of British sociology appear to be the multiplication and enlargement of university teaching and university and independent research, an increase in the number of graduate scholarships and a freeing of university staffs from the overload of teaching and administration to enable them to engage in long-term and fundamental research.

A. Tropp

Notes

[1] I wish to thank J.A. Banks, O.L. Banks, T.J.H. Bishop, D. Lockwood, T.P. Morris and W.H. Scott who acted as rapporteurs at the conference held by the British Sociological Association. The present paper is

based on the discussions at the conference. I wish to thank the above named, Dr. B. Wootton and Mr. J.H. Madge for their comments on the first draft of this paper. None of them can be held responsible for any opinions expressed in the paper.

[2]. In 1953, 44 higher degrees and 166 first degrees were awarded in sociology and social anthropology in Great Britain. A small proportion of the first degrees and a large proportion of the higher degrees were in social anthropology

[3] These two chairmen's names do not appear on lists of holders of posts in sociology. Goodman was in fact then Director of the think-tank Political and Economic Planning, but he was the first Honorary General Secretary of the BSA. However, he left PEP in 1951 for a job with Marks and Spencer, and in 1957 moved to the USA to work in the World Bank, so he vanishes from the scene of British sociology. Sprott held chairs at Nottingham in both Philosophy and Psychology, but he was the author of Sociology (1949) and succeeded Mannheim as editor of Rourledge and Kegan Paul's 'International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction', and his help is acknowledgeD in the introductions of a number of the empirical studies of the 1950s. (See Halsey 2004:26-8 for a more general note on him.)

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